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What's so authentic about restoration?

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Special Issue – Restoration



What's so authentic about restoration?

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INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITORS

When shown two identical works of art, and told that one is the original and the other an artist-sanctioned copy, most viewers claim that they prefer the 'original', precisely because they imagine that something of the artist's hand remains. Knowing full well that most everything that is old, yet still *exists*, has undergone some form of restoration, we are surprised that some philosophers still share viewers' preference for some original over its sanctioned copy, as if they too believe that something of the artist's hand remains, even if paint molecules have chipped off or surfaces have been (unbeknownst to them) routinely reworked. As the contributors to this volume of *Aesthetic Investigations* reiterate, restoration and its multiple variants, which range from preservation (preserving *as is*) to conservation (preventing further deterioration), is a fact of the matter.

Conservators fortunately have proved to be both great practitioners and scholars. Had they neither reflected upon the ramifications of their techniques, nor recorded their findings, we don't imagine that so many buildings, monuments, gardens, artworks, or films would have survived intact. As these articles attest, those works that do survive seem to have little bearing on their pasts. So what's so authentic about restoration?

We were pleasantly surprised that this issue's respondents repeatedly cited 19th Century Viennese art historian Alois Riegl who identified 'age value' (the signs of ageing) alongside 'historic value' (the work's historical contribution). The fact that so many conservators and philosophers of conservation not only share Riegl's admiration for age value, but aim to preserve changes that indicate age (as opposed to the results of mishandling or material decay), suggests that most works that viewers, and thus philosophers, experience are actually quite different now than they were at t_0 , some imaginary moment when works were brand new and had yet to endure time's arrow, which triggers *lacunae* owing to weather, wear and tear, or pollution, etc. On this level, the notion that something of the artist's hands, as opposed to those of the conservators, remains somewhat of a myth.

For sure, the work itself would not exist had some artist not originated it. Moreover, conservation practices that employ restoration techniques are meant to reinforce artists' practices, thus ensuring longevity. But, in a way, the work has its own temporality. Another oft-cited art historian is Cesare Brandi, whose influential book *Teoria del restauro* (1963) dealt with figurative painting and archaeological artefacts, yet its arrival coincided with conceptual art. Despite his focus on aesthetic concerns, Brandi differentiated three eras that are of particular interest here: duration (time spent by artist creating the work), interval (time since the work has been in circulation), and moment (when the viewer recognises the work as art). Brandi considers restoration an interpretative process that joins the observer to work *in the moment*. Restoration is indeed a fact of the matter, but this matter is also a matter in time, undergoing constant evolution and thus demands an understanding and criteria that acknowledge both materiality and temporality.

While there are those readers who may not consider these essays 'philosophical' enough, we expect there will be many more who will be amazed by the complex situations that restorers must face, as well as the technical details informing each decision. In fact, these papers are the sort that could only be written by practitioners. And in fact, most of this issue's contributors are conservators. As these papers indicate, conservators regularly attend conferences, during which participants crowdsource problems and standardise procedures. The currently accepted practices of minimum interference, re-treatability (reversibility), and preservation of immaterial components arose during such meetings.

Additionally, numerous declarations such as the 1965 Venice Charter (monuments), the 1981 Florence Charter (garden conservation), the 1994 Nara Declaration (cultural diversity and authenticity), the 1999 Burra Charter (Australian heritage sites), and dozens more have influenced conservators' restoration techniques used on film, fine art, photographs, and gardens alike. To the outsider, it could seem that this field is so highly standardised that practitioners need only employ those practices that uphold the current char-

ter. But as these papers attest, such charters could not have anticipated the effects of artists testing their paintings' resistance to surviving outdoors for long periods of time (Jin Strand Ferrer et. al.), an original's disappearance forcing conservators to piece together selected parts to make sensible wholes (Julia Wallmüller), living environments such as gardens growing beyond recognition over time (Mateusz Salwa), or builders adopting 'façadism' to hasten a city's approval of new construction (Evangelia Kyriazi). Such anomalous situations have required conservators to make and assess educated guesses in terms of the validity of their next steps, should they seek an authentic solution.

All of these papers effectively address the ageing process and the way objects and places suddenly seem dramatically different. The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that entropy is always increasing, which means that disorder whose visible signs are decay, break down, and loss, is also increasing. One issue repeatedly addressed by the contributors of this special issue concerns the notion of identity, between some *original* predecessor and its surviving successor. In retrospect, our requesting that authors address authenticity was meant to discover whether it could be possible to maximise identity. On one level, the identity associated with objects undergoing restoration resembles that of discussions surrounding personhood. Like a human being who has endured a heart-lung transplant, replaced knee, or facelift, or a body lying in state shortly after its death, an object's appearance, structure, function, and even its purpose are likely to change between t_0 and t_n , yet its identity remains intact. Neither reparation nor restoration makes something entirely new, unless of course it wasn't really there to begin with, which is not our topic here. One not only expects changes over time, but one must anticipate such changes, and even take precautions to minimise changes, just as one might minimise meat consumption and maximise vegetable/fruit consumption to reduce the risk of heart attack.

One perspective that the contributors all seem to share is the view that 'age value' signals authenticity, since change over time is to be expected. Many of the contributors note that objects have individual histories that must survive restoration, rather than be obliterated by restoration. Julia Wallmüller explores a very interesting dilemma whereby the 'principle of authenticity forbids interventions that erase traces of a work's particular history, yet the principle of restoration requires removal of such additions.' To get around this dilemma, she suggests separating an object's material components, which must be restored, from its immaterial components which must remain intact.

Addressing an entirely different cultural artefact, Mateusz Salwa compares gardens to music since gardens, like performances, change over time, even as various aspects must persist unchanged. 'Nature acts like an artist and performs the piece in real time.' Garden restoration thus risks to override nature's performance. Being living, growing things, gardens undergo an even

greater change than ordinary static objects and monuments. Gardens tend to expand their sizes over time, whereas objects tend to shrink due to decay and entropy. Salwa next analyses the impact of two different approaches to garden restoration: the 'idealistic' theory, which treats gardens as cultural objects similar to other works and demands restoration back to some originally designed form, and the 'materialistic' theory, which claims that gardens' processual qualities call for conservation.

Three conservators working on Edvard Munch paintings at different venerable institutions, such as Oslo's Munch Museum, analyse an extremely surprising situation. Apparently, Munch thought it was a good idea to leave his paintings outdoors to see whether they would resist (or not) the elements, including bird poop, rain, snow, dirt, human handling, etc. The conservators recognise a huge dilemma here. Although Munch never actually referred to this process as the 'kill or cure' remedy, he photographed his paintings outdoors and never bothered to clean them once they were returned indoors, suggesting that he accepted such post-studio additions as part of the overall process. What then is the role of the conservator, especially since Munch's stress tests outdoors accelerated his paintings' wear and tear?

Given that Brandi emphasized the connection between conservation and interpretation, conservators play a role on par with that of curators who, working on behalf of artists, try their best to interpret and implement artists' preferences, goals, and expectations for their works. If there is anything 'authentic' about restoration that goes beyond its fetishistic character, 'What's so authentic about restoration?' conveys the authenticity of conservators' everyday practice, given their constant examination and questioning of their own discipline.

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